



KARUNA 08



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## AN ANCIENT INJUSTICE

India today is booming, taking its place among the world's economic giants. But behind the facade of prosperous modernity there lurks an ancient and primitive social system that places every individual in a rigid social hierarchy – determining people's livelihoods, marriage partners, educational opportunities and social position. Caste attitudes, sanctified by Hindu scriptures and underpinned by hundreds of years of fear, violence and superstition, still have a tremendous hold over people's minds and lives.

Of 1.1 billion people in India, approximately 250 are considered so low that they are outside the caste system. Once called 'untouchables', they are now known as Dalits – the Broken People. Many are confined in a prison of prejudice and poverty. With severely limited access to water, food, work, education, and basic services they are routinely discriminated against by the police, judiciary, teachers, and politicians, as well as their higher-caste neighbours.

The symbol of hope for these people is the late Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar (pictured left). A tireless campaigner on their behalf, he taught that caste is an attitude of mind and that education will lead to liberation. The devotion of Dalit people to him and his ideas is total. His portrait sits on their shrines along with the Buddha, and hundreds of millions of people use his example to strive for dignity, respect and elevation for themselves and their children.

Karuna is a Buddhist-run charity, which allows us to build connections with Dalit communities. We finance educational and cultural projects to help their struggle and those of other disadvantaged groups in South Asia, irrespective of caste or religion.

In this newsletter, we show the harsh realities of caste and highlight how Karuna-supported projects are having profoundly transformative effects on people's lives and playing a significant part in helping many to free themselves.





# REMEMBERING KHAIRLANJI

Right: Back door to the Bhotmange family home.

Below: Portraits of the murdered Bhotmange family



On 29 September, 2006, in Khairlanji village Surekha Bhotmange, her daughter Priyanka and her two sons Roshan and Sudhir were dragged from their home by a mob, stripped naked, beaten to death, and their bodies dumped in a canal. Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange, the father of the family, escaped by a lucky chance. The details of this caste-based crime are sickening, and the hatred behind it is difficult to comprehend, but the viciousness is typical of many crimes committed against lower caste people in India every day. Most of these crimes are invisible, but this atrocity came to light through Dalit campaigns and became an international news story. The Manuski Project, supported by Karuna, played an important part in making that happen.

The Bhotmange family were one of three Mahar households in the village of 150 houses. As Dalits, at the bottom of the caste structure, they are traditionally expected to remain in a position of subservience, poverty and uncomplaining degradation. But they didn't. They owned and worked five acres of good land. The children were being educated and doing very well. Priyanka was the only girl in the village to attend school. They worked hard and had ambitions and the castes directly above them in the pecking order didn't like it. The higher castes attempted a land grab, which the Bhotmanges resisted. Then Surekha and Priyanka gave evidence to the police about a violent exchange between a friend of the Bhotmanges and some local landowners, who ended up in a police cell. When the landowners were released, they came looking for vengeance.



Below and right; Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange revisits his family field.

High caste jealousy of his success here cost his family their lives.



There is a horrible familiarity to the story – Dalits own land, do well in education, challenge the social hierarchy and the response is a violent backlash, a dramatic warning against working hard and standing up for themselves.

Today, Bhaiyyalal can't live in Khairlanji and is unable to work the land he loves. It is too dangerous; he needs a bodyguard with him at all times. The Government gave him a house but he prefers to live with one of his few friends. 'I am lonely when I go to the house, so I stay here', he says. He has a single hope for the future: 'the murderers should be brought to justice.'

A trial is underway following a huge campaign, but is dragging on slowly. He has no plans beyond that. 'I cannot speak about that now,' he says, and one wonders how he will ever find peace. On a rare visit to his hut in Khairlanji he tends the garden, tidies his shattered home and all seems normal. But his face tells another story. The horrible fact of what happened there is written into his skin, and his simple words speak volumes: 'The grief is always with me.'



# A CASTLE OF MIND



Priyadarshi Telang surveys a rally for change in Mumbai at Dr Ambedkar Day annual celebrations.



When the team at the Manuski Project heard about the Khairlanji massacre they knew they had to inform India and the world. Manuski means humanity, compassion and respect, and the project is inspired by the teachings of Dr Ambedkar and supported by Karuna. Working with discriminated people, helping them develop their own transformation, it is run by people from Scheduled Caste backgrounds.

Hareesh Dalvi, Project Officer at Manuski says, 'There may be media focus on an atrocity case for three or four days. A week later a new case is discovered and attention is diverted. Then in the third week, another case. So follow-up is important. We highlight the incident in the media, organise campaigns so it doesn't disappear from collective memory. With Khairlanji we circulated a report to thousands of e-mail addresses and informed the national and international media. By encouraging a debate in the media, people are drawn to the issue and help becomes available to those working at grass

roots level. We encourage local organisations and provide resources, so they will be able to support the victims, give psychological help, money, and assist rehabilitation.'

Manuski has set up a weblog, which distributes information about Khairlanji. 'We set up [www.atrocitynews.wordpress.com](http://www.atrocitynews.wordpress.com) because there has never been a channel to expose atrocities against Dalits,' says Hareesh. 'We also highlight successes, how it is possible to fight humiliation and discrimination. But, we do not think that because the public are aware we have been successful. Success means there should be justice. And there should be no further atrocities, that is success.'

The name and image of Dr Ambedkar permeates Manuski. 'It is Dr Ambedkar that keeps me going' says Priyadarshi Telang, secretary at Manuski. 'Ambedkar moved a huge number of people; he expected that educated Dalit people should take the initiative to improve conditions for themselves and society.'





Every year on 6 December, hundreds of thousands of Dr Ambedkar's followers make their way to the place in Mumbai where he was cremated in 1956. It is a moving display of devotion, with people queuing for 10 hours or more to pay their respects. 'People come here from different parts of India to pay homage to their leader' says Priyadarshi. 'It is an emotional experience to see hundreds of thousands of people and be with them. The feeling of dedication to Dr Ambedkar gives me inspiration and strength to be part of that family.'

He also explains the nature of caste. 'Caste is not a physical structure that can be broken, it is a motion of mind, and we need tools to work with it. Dr Ambedkar said, "The world cannot be reformed except by the reformation of the mind of man, and the mind of the world." I believe in Dr Ambedkar. What he taught will work! Young people from all over the country are coming forward, they are not disregarding their identity, they believe they can do well. I can see that confidence and enthusiasm in young people, and that is because of Dr Ambedkar.'







# CREATING A CASTELESS SOCIETY

The lives of three women are transformed by communication.

Caste is in the mind and we should try to eradicate it' says Anita Gaikwaad, an accountant at a Karuna-supported medical project called Jeevak, in a slum in Pune.

'I was a very horrible person,' she continues, with a beaming smile. 'I lived in the slums and the atmosphere is not good. We use a common tap and you have to fight for a bucket of water, so that's why I became a fighting cock!'

Karunadipa, who manages the Jeevak medical project, agreed: 'The atmosphere here was not so good, there were many misunderstandings.'

Then five years ago, Aniruddha, a teacher of Nonviolent Communication (nvc) ran classes in the area and things began to change. He is supported by Karuna to teach this system of communication, founded in the us by a mediation expert called Marshall Rosenberg, enabling people to connect through their shared humanity rather than caste identities. It has had a remarkable effect. 'I learnt how we should talk to each other,' says Anita 'Now I realise I have to help others. I

am not a horrible person any more!' Nvc changed the way Jeevak functioned too. 'Now there is more teamwork. It is like a bridge for us, whoever we are communicating with.'

Chhaiya Bhalerao, a teacher in a Karuna-sponsored kindergarten, sees hope for the future. 'The teachers come from different villages and castes, with different attitudes and opinions, but through nvc we have learned how to relate to each other. Dr Ambedkar's mission was to create a nation without caste. With nvc we are trying to create a casteless society.'

Karunadipa (centre) says, 'I felt like a goldsmith, trying to purify our communication.'



LIKE MOTHERS  
TO ME



'In the village, the other students wouldn't let me play with them. It is not like that here in Latur'...



Vidhya and Jyoti playing cricket.



The Latur Girls Hostel is a special place. A delightful family atmosphere is created by 65 girls and three wardens with a mix of exuberance, intelligence and care. The walls resound with creativity and potential.

The Karuna-supported hostel was purpose-built after a devastating earthquake in 1993 in this drought-prone area of Maharashtra, with a large population of tribal people and migrant sugar cane workers. Admission to the hostel is based on need – these girls come from the very bottom of the caste structure. They live at the hostel free of charge, attend the local schools and are coached by the hostel wardens. There is a long waiting-list of parents looking for a place for their child, hoping to rescue them from lives of poverty and discrimination. The education of a child can pull a whole family out of the cycle of deprivation.

Vidhya Salgare, aged 14, is lucky to be here. She is from a Dalit family. 'I was 10 when my father was murdered. There was bad discrimination against Dalits in the office where he worked.

They found acid in his ears. My mother sells vegetables now, a very hard life. My father loved me, and wanted me to get an education. In the village, the teacher made me sit at the back of the class and the other students wouldn't let me play with them. It is not like that here in Latur. The wardens treat me like their own child. I am very happy here; they are like mothers to me.' Shy and withdrawn when she arrived, today Vidhya is self-confident, and doing well at school. 'My favourite subject is Maths and I am a First ranking student at school. My ambition is to be a teacher and I want to donate my first salary to the hostel.' She loves dancing and has performed many times at school. 'The first time I was frightened but when I remembered the faces of the wardens I found inspiration. The other girls were calling out, "Vidhya, Vidhya, Vidhya" and I felt very happy!'

As always, Dr Ambedkar provides a strong example. 'When I hear about Dr Ambedkar I feel he has given me the chance to be a top quality person,' she says.

Vidhya Salgare (left) with her friend Jyoti Awale (right) are inspired by hostel wardens like Shaweta Bhandare (centre)



One of Vidhya's friends, Jyoti Awale, is from a Scheduled Tribe, the Mahadevkoli. 'My parents are labourers; I have three sisters and one brother. My parents could not get educated but they are very keen for their children to be educated. All of us go to school. In the village, some upper caste people were harsh and at the school there was discrimination, so I was not interested in learning. But here all the children are my friends. The wardens speak to me very warmly, I feel very loved. I dream of being a teacher, I want to help my parents, they have worked very hard for me and I want to make a happy life for them.'

Shaweta Bhandare is a warden at the hostel and an old hostel girl herself. 'I lived in a hostel from age 10 and admired the wardens' work so I became a warden when I finished school. I grew up in a hostel, I have a feeling for the life, and I know the problems. The girls are like my family. The parents have left their children here and I must honour that trust.' Shaweta is in a position to influence caste attitudes and behaviour. She says, 'There are students from different backgrounds and castes and they tend to stick together in their groups and castes, but I use a creative approach to encourage them to mix.'

The hostel wardens have a good reputation in Latur, which helps break down caste barriers. 'People from other castes help us even if they don't know our caste. They do not look down on us, I think because of our positive approach, from our Buddhist practice.'

The hostel is a wonderful example of how the rigid unkindness of caste can be broken down by care and friendship, and girls who were once imprisoned by poverty and discrimination can realise their potential and, in turn, help others gain dignity, strength and hope.

Jyoti,  
and Shaweta

# BEYOND FEAR



Today, Sanjivani Pawar is a leader of Ghodka Rajouri village in Maharashtra, but 16 years ago things were very different. When her husband died she was left with two small children, Jyoti and Rakesh, and little means of raising them. Traditionally, an Indian woman loses her power as a wife and mother if her husband dies. This is one way that caste society subjugates women to maintain the status quo. A widow must stay at home and rely on the goodwill of her family and caste. Her hut can become a prison. But Sanjivani wanted to work her land to get her children educated. 'Land is important; it is more than growing food to raise my family. It takes me forward, to own something.

But the community, and my family, said, "You are a widow, why are you going to farm, why are you trying to educate your children?"

And there was worse. 'As I was a young widow there was pressure from men, demanding sex. They said: "We will make your life easier if you do this." That was very horrible. I could not go out and work my land.'

But Sanjivani made a friend who would change her life. Manisha Tokale and her husband Ashok run Savitribai Phule Mahila Mandal (SPMM), sponsored by Karuna. The project trains and supports community leaders in villages around the town of Beed in central Maharashtra, raising awareness of rights, setting up self-

**A widow breaks free from the prison of caste and gender prejudice to become a role model for others.**





Sanjivini Pawar with her daughter Jyoti.

Below: 'Now I deal with Government officers, I help other people.'

help savings groups, and empowering women to take charge of their lives. Manisha has an eye for potential leaders and, through strong ties of friendship, she nurtures them towards confidence and self-respect. Sanjivini is one of her success stories.

Manisha travelled from village to village, raising awareness, forming self-help groups. I met her and she encouraged me to get involved. I started a group but it was hard to go out and bring people into it. Manisha said, "Let people say what they like, it is alright for you to go and do a job." It took five years for me to get out of this situation. Without Manisha, my life

would have been humiliating.' Later SPMM, and Sanjivini, took up and won a land case on behalf of the villagers. 'The people who were abusing me before started supporting and respecting me. People realised Manisha, SPMM and I do good things and we are strong. Now I deal with Government officers, I help other people, they seek my guidance. Not only my own caste, but people from upper castes too. The attitude of caste was there but I was able to come out of it. Others should not suffer as I did and I want to help as many people as possible. I am not going to fear anyone ever again.'





**'A VICTORY  
FOR ALL PEOPLE'**



The god Hanuman in the Pola temple

Baliram Nade and his father.



It was at the Pola harvest festival, seven years ago, that Baliram Nade and his friends chose to take a stand. Traditionally, oxen are paraded around the temple at Pola and it is the role of the Matang caste, to which Baliram and his friends belong, to play the drum for the upper castes.

‘When I was growing up here in the village there was no respect for us,’ Baliram says. ‘The small child of an upper-caste person could make derogatory remarks to my father, and my father would call him “Master”. But I was going to school and reading books by Dr Ambedkar, our leader. Education is the key. As I got older there was a growing anger, and we were in touch with a group of human rights activists connected to SPMM, so someone was there to help us.

‘Traditionally, we aren’t allowed to parade our own oxen at Pola, we only beat the drum,’ he continues. ‘We were not even allowed into the temple. But I wanted to parade my oxen too. I thought: Enough is enough, we have done this thing for a long time and we are not going to do it any more!’

Baliram with families from different caste backgrounds.



‘I paraded my ox along with the others; my cousin was beating the drum. The upper caste people got angry. They said it was our caste occupation to beat the drum for their oxen, not for our own oxen and we must behave according to our caste. They got some weapons and beat us very badly.’

The police were pressurised by the upper castes and wouldn’t file the complaint when the incident was reported and even threatened a counter-charge of theft. It was only with the help of the human rights activists that the case was registered at all.

In the following months, there was tension in the village but with the help of the SPMM the situation slowly improved. ‘There was a lot of fear all the time, even the threat of being killed,’ says Baliram, ‘the upper-caste villagers took an oath in the temple, saying, “We will break these people”. The older people of our own caste said: “Because you are doing this, we are all suffering. You don’t know these people, they can kill you!” The SPMM activists, aided by Baliram, worked

hard to build communication between the opposing sides and reduce the threat of violence. Finally, the higher-caste people began to recognise the need for change and the case didn’t go to court. To demonstrate their human rights, in October of the following year Baliram, his friends and the SPMM activists walked into the temple. ‘On that day we felt we had got justice.’

Other things have changed for Baliram as well. ‘The SPMM saw my potential, as a person who can fight for my own rights and the rights of others,’ he says. ‘Through their help I am now a fully trained lawyer and work as a full-time activist with SPMM. The people in the village who were against me now acknowledge my strengths and seek my help. I represent all the castes in front of the officials and all the villagers are on my side. They used to abuse us, but they saw they were wrong and apologised for that. It is a victory not only for me, but for all people. I am living a full human life now.’





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